

The most expensive party in history still echoes over 50 years later



In October 1971, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran hosted what has been described as the most extravagant party in history to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. This event, held at the ancient ruins of Persepolis, is considered a contributing factor to the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, which established the political landscape that underlies Iran's modern conflicts with its neighbors and the United States.

The Celebration at Persepolis

To mark the occasion, the Shah gathered world leaders for a three-day celebration on grounds built for this occasion in the middle of the desert.



Over 60 heads of state were invited, including dignitaries like Queen Elizabeth II and Emperor Haile Selassie. Guests stayed in air-conditioned luxury tents designed by a French interior designer. The renowned Parisian restaurant Maxim's catered the event, flying in its entire kitchen staff. The menu featured extravagances such as peacock stuffed with foie gras, caviar, 25,000 bottles of wine and champagne, and water imported from France.

The cost of the three-day festival is debated to this day. While the Shah claimed it cost just under 20 million dollars, some estimates place the total as high as 700 million dollars. Regardless of the exact figure, the expense was seen as exorbitant for a country where many citizens faced poverty.



Political Backlash and Revolution

The lavish celebration sparked widespread outrage and unified the Shah's fragmented opposition. Ayatollah Khomeini, then in exile, condemned the event as a "Devil's festival," criticizing the consumption of alcohol and the attire of female guests. Ordinary Iranians were furious over the extravagant spending while many people were suffering from hunger. The party became a rallying point for disparate groups, including communists, liberals, nationalists, and religious conservatives. This unified criticism was crucial in paving the way for the revolution years later.

The event highlighted the Shah's disconnect from his people. Although he apologized in 1974 for the celebration and "decades of poor decisions," it was too late to quell the growing dissent.

The Iranian Revolution began in 1978 and culminated in February 1979 with the overthrow of the Shah, ending 2,500 years of monarchy in Iran. A republic was established with both political and religious leadership, but Ayatollah Khomeini held the true power, fostering an anti-Western sentiment. The opulent party intended to celebrate Persian greatness ultimately acted as a catalyst for the end of the Iranian monarchy. The Shah died in exile in Cairo in 1980, but the memory of his 1971 party continues to echo through history.

